

Testimony on Behalf of the Oklahoma Humanities Council

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Valorie Walters, Executive Officer for the Division of the Chickasaw Cultural Center, Chickasaw Nation, and board member, Oklahoma Humanities Council; addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, May 16, 2017.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Oklahoma Humanities Council, Oklahoma's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). You will hear testimony during these two days about many issues of critical importance to Native Americans, but all too often, the less tangible issue of how we preserve, celebrate, and increase awareness of our rich history and culture is overlooked. I am here to provide information on the importance of NEH funding—which helps us tell this story that is so fundamental to understanding the history of the nation as a whole—to Native Americans in Oklahoma and across the nation.

The NEH Office of Federal/State Partnership oversees grant support to the 56 state, jurisdictional, and territorial humanities councils and it is their programs I would like to address today. These councils are nonprofit organizations dedicated to providing the general public with academically sound programs that educate, enlighten, and engage citizens throughout the country. For over four decades, the state humanities councils have made the academic humanities disciplines available to the citizens of their states and territories. The rich content found in the fields of history, philosophy, literature, ethics, and jurisprudence have been the basis of programs whose formats are as varied as the topics they address. They include museum exhibits, documentary films, symposia, speakers' bureaus, elementary and high school outreach programs, teacher institutes, and reading and discussion sessions.

These programs have been directed to wide and diverse audiences of all ages and ethnicities. They include veterans, school children, teachers, parents, senior citizens, minorities, underserved populations, the newly literate, prisoners, librarians, and their patrons—in short, the citizens of our nation. Across the country, the state humanities councils share a true belief that the humanities belong to everyone. Our mission statements, goals, and objectives include reaching all audiences, including those who are underserved, or whose stories are undertold.

Many of the stories shared are those from our Native American communities. According to the 2015 census, Native Americans number over 3 million nationwide, representing 567 federally recognized tribes. Although a minority (roughly 1.2%) of the total U.S. population, the story of the Native American past and present is important to all Americans. Our contributions to American society have been and continue to be significant in all areas of public life and service, including over 200,000 active duty military members and veterans.

This collective history is our nation's oldest history. Critically important to Native people, our culture, traditions, and history are passed down through generations. Additionally, however, we are proud to share our past and vibrant present with our fellow Americans.

A well-proven and critical means of relating the stories of Native heritage and current contributions is the public programming supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the state humanities councils. In Oklahoma, the state humanities council has sponsored many programs over the years that have brought Native culture to wide audiences. Among them is funding for the "Symposium on the American Indian" at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. This week-long symposium is free and open to the public. Humanities scholars and tribal members share their knowledge of American Indian contributions in art, literature, and the sustaining of traditional culture and practices today.

Also funded by the council is "An Everlasting Fire: The Seminoles of Oklahoma," an exhibit at the Seminole Museum in Wewoka that explores their history and identity. The vast collection of historical artifacts, artworks, photographs, sound, and video recordings in the museum's collections were used in this redesign of gallery space. The museum is also employing new museum standards to ensure longevity of the collections while educating the public

The Sauk Language Department of the Sac and Fox Nation held its Algonquin Cultural and Language Festival that brought tribal cultural and language organizations together for a two-day celebration of the similarities and diversities of the Algonquin language. Exhibits, demonstrations, and presentations took place in Stroud, Oklahoma.

Cherokee National Historical Society's Heritage Center outreach educational program has also received council funding. This cross-cultural teaching and demonstration program is designed to serve youth through adult ages throughout a fourteen-county jurisdictional region that constitutes the Cherokee Nation. The program reaches about 15,000 people. The program allows for the interpretation of the economic and social aspects of Cherokee society, its beliefs, religion, language, culture, arts, architecture, oral history, and technology.

The Metro Caddo Cultural Club in Norman, Oklahoma has received several grants from the council for their Caddo Festival. This event celebrates Caddo culture through traditional dance performances and demonstrations of foodways. The speakers engage the audience in discussion of the nutrition of native foods and modern foods. These topics open a discussion of the devastating effects of the national epidemic of diabetes.

The programming sponsored by the council spans diverse formats. The Oklahoma Humanities Council also funded a documentary film entitled, "Lost Nation: The Ioway," which reached over 61,000 audience members through its airing on public television stations. A K-12 classroom curriculum guide was funded to profile women of Native Oklahoma whose accomplishments illustrate their importance to society. These role models' stories were shared with educators, who in turn were able to use the curriculum in their classrooms. The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum of Oklahoma City hosted a council-funded exhibit entitled, "Power and Prestige: Headdresses of the American Plains." Nine eagle feather headdresses from the Northern and Southern American Great Plains tribes were exhibited. Ledger art, photographs, and text panels interpreted the use and style of the headdresses.

In 2015, when the NEH offered state humanities councils funding for programs about or for veterans, Oklahoma Humanities Council sought the partnership of our state's public television station, OETA. The resulting thirty-minute video entitled "Native Oklahoma: Vietnam Veterans" tells the unique stories of veterans from several Oklahoma tribes.

A project that illustrates another partnership is the development of a reading and discussion theme for the council's *Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma* series that take place free of charge across the state in public libraries. The Chickasaw Nation contributed matching funds for the theme development that features contemporary Native authors.

Similar programs have taken place across the nation sponsored and funded by state humanities councils. These programs take many forms. Teacher institutes in Alabama, Colorado, South Dakota, and Texas focused on the Native American traditions in their states. "Alabama Fever: A Games-Based Discovery of Territorial Alabama" explored interactions of Native people in the Alabama Territory with British, Spanish, and American settlers. Colorado's institutes on the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes were planned with the tribes' input and included tribal presenters. South Dakota regularly presents teacher institutes on American Indian history in order to enhance understanding of South Dakota's indigenous people. Finally, Texas supported the Caddo Traditions Teachers' Workshop in a two-day program allowing teachers the opportunity to meet with tribal members and scholars.

Reading programs for children and adults alike regularly feature Native American authors and themes. In Colorado, the Motherread/Fatheread program has been of benefit to children and parents of the Southern Ute tribe. Humanities Iowa showcased the writing of Meskwaki Native American Ray Young Bear in their library and reading book series. Humanities Nebraska's *Prime Time Family Reading Time*, a 6-week program of reading, discussion, and storytelling, includes a version for Native American families, 80% of whom said it changed their children's attitude toward the library. *The Young Readers Initiative* of South Dakota Humanities was recently expanded to all nine of the state's American Indian reservations. Students are given a book to read over the summer and meet with the author the following fall. Delaware's reading and discussion series, *Literature and Medicine*, for healthcare professionals has three Native American-themed sessions.

Documentary films are also frequently funded through state humanities councils. Native Hawaiians were featured in a sixty-minute documentary called "Hawaiian Masterpieces: Ka Hana Kapa" showcasing the art and techniques of master practitioners used by ancient Hawaiians. Documentaries in Indiana have focused on the Fall Creek Massacre and its aftermath. In Massachusetts, Mass Humanities supported the creation and distribution of the full-length documentary film "Dawnland" about the Maine Wabanaki-State Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Rhode Island Council for the Humanities funded two documentaries, one that explored New England Native identity from the point of view of language preservation and loss and another on King Phillip's War and its effect on Native people. Humanities Texas has awarded numerous grants for the creation of documentary films

on Native American topics including Comanche Chief Quanah Parker and another entitled, "The Last Conquistador," chronicling the opposition Native Americans had to the creation of a statue of conquistador Juan de Oñate.

Festivals funded by state humanities councils celebrate Native culture across the country. Idaho Humanities Council funded a Native American Film Series featuring five monthly documentary films by Native Americans. Humanities Nebraska's "Vision Maker Film Festival" showcased contemporary Native American filmmakers that reached more than 4,000 audience members. The South Dakota Festival of Books annually features a "History and Tribal Writing Track" with American Indian humanities scholars and authors. Significant tribal voices have included Sherman Alexie, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, and Louise Erdrich. Humanities Texas awarded a grant to the American Indian Resource Center in San Antonio to support a three-day festival recognizing peacemakers of American Indian societies through storytelling, written word, art exhibits, and traditional dance.

Support of museum exhibits is widespread among state humanities councils. Councils in Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and South Carolina have funded exhibits on Native American topics. South Carolina Humanities supported a new permanent exhibit and collateral programming about prehistory in their state, in addition to an exhibit featuring Native Artists of the Southeast. The Michigan Humanities Council partnered with local groups to bring an interpretive highway exhibit describing the last Potawatomi homestead of the Hannahville Indian Community before their forced relocation. In New Jersey, funding from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities enabled the reinstallation of the Newark Museum's Native American collection in a new location.

The array of programs that state humanities employ is vast, and their impact cannot be underestimated. In addition to those mentioned, speakers' bureaus, curricula, conferences, National History Day events, heritage tours, school tours, radio broadcasts, and celebrations have been funded with exemplary results. In Mississippi, a Chickasaw Celebration held in Tupelo drew over 1,500 attendees, including 1,200 students who participated in Chickasaw crafts and activities. New Mexico Humanities Council's National History Day competition advances more Native students to the national contest than any other state. New Jersey Council for the Humanities' consistent support of school curricula has meant that teachers' abilities to accurately present Native perspectives to their students has been greatly enhanced. In 2017 alone, Montana Humanities provided 17 programs to schools and organizations across the state, including 10 organizations on Montana reservations.

We all benefit from state councils' work in our states. Those programs that support Native American tribes, their cultures, traditions, and language are just some of the many ways the importance of NEH funding to our nation can be seen. It is very important, not just to Native Americans, but to all Americans. I would like to thank you for your previous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, enabling it to further understanding and pride in our nation's oldest history.